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ADDITIONAL COLLECTION ESSENTIAL TO CORRECT
THEORY IN FOLK-LORE AND MYTHOLOGY.¹

IN the few remarks which the time at my disposal will allow me to offer, I desire to emphasize the importance of employing the few years which remain, in order to make, as far as possible, a complete record of the lore of primitive races. Such collection, at the present time, appears to me more important than speculative discussion. In saying this I do not intend to undervalue theory; it is the object of students of mythology, as of all other branches of research, to unify and coördinate their material by means of correct general views; but I am of opinion that the material at the disposal of the investigator is not yet adequate to convert hypotheses into accepted generalizations, and that, unless greater activity is shown in using the opportunity which still remains open, many problems of mythology and psychology are destined to continue unsolved.

There is no study in which the vicissitudes of speculation have been more kaleidoscopic than in mythology, and none which is in a more unsatisfactory condition. This state of things, one would think, would induce caution in venturing on too sweeping inductions. Unhappily, the fact is just the reverse. In the kindred pursuit of philology, the writer who thinks he has discovered a new law of language usually presents it in learned form, with abundant references and citations, in a journal devoted to the subject, or a special treatise, for the eyes of the few whom he thinks capable of passing on its merits; while in mythology, a subject more obscure and complicated, the student who imagines that he has invented a new theory is apt to seek a hearing before the general public, and to present his results in such a form as may be agreeable to the taste of the general reader. The result is that a mass of phrases, such as sun-myth, Aryan origins, and the like, are caught up by his readers, who are of course struck by his discussion in proportion to its apparent singularity and novelty, and who seize upon such catch-words as if they really corresponded to any precise idea. Such treatment of a very obscure and complicated subject appears to me worse than useless, because it posits a general problem where it may well be that none exists, and makes the learner imagine that the value of the study consists, not, as is really the case, in the ascertained facts themselves, but in some speculation about whole systems of conceptions which may very likely be in the nature of things incapable of unification and condensed statement.

¹ Read at the Annual Meeting of the American Folk-Lore Society, November 28, 1889.

The stress laid by writers on comparative mythology on their special views is the more provoking because the differences of these views are the necessary result of the imperfection of the record, which deficiency a little energy would do much to remove.

If, for example, it is possible to differ regarding the connection of meteorological phenomena with myth-making, it is because it is not yet determined with precision how far an element of conscious symbolism enters into the mythologic conceptions of existing savage tribes. A complete account of the myths of a single sun-worshipping tribe of North America would throw, to say the least, as much light on nature myths, and their relation to hero tales, as researches into Sanscrit, Egyptian, and Assyrian records.

No matter what field of primitive tradition the student attempts to cultivate, he finds his progress blocked by the want of accessible information. Not only are printed accounts inadequate, but they are often positively misleading. Nothing, in fact, requires more patience, honesty, and exactness than this branch of research. How often does a traveler assume as the belief of a race what is the opinion, perhaps misinterpreted, of an individual! It makes, indeed, all the difference from what source the information is derived. Plato tells us that it was a popular saying in Greece, "The thyrsus bearers are many, but the initiated few."¹ So it was then, is still, and and always has been, as much among uncivilized as civilized man. The belief and ritual of the savage, the sacred formulas and songs of the savage, are jealously guarded by him; his secret societies conceal his worship, as did the secret societies of classic antiquity. A traveler who spent a whole year among a remote tribe of Australia informed the writer that the people among whom he lived possessed no religious rites. But thus far, in all cases where the right method has been taken, it has been found that there does exist among people in a primitive state of culture a ritual and a mythology more intelligible and rational than the state of mind of the individual savage would lead us to expect. The roots of religious feeling among primitive tribes are in their nature obscure, and are rendered more difficult to arrive at in consequence of the secrecy with which are guarded the rites wherewith they are inseparably connected; but it is in these rites, and the songs and tales which explain them, that the character of early religion must be sought, and a solution of psychologic problems found. It is, however, only within the last few years that anything serious has been accomplished in the elucidation of such mysteries. The work of Rink and Boas among the Eskimo, of Kubary in the Pelew Islands, of Washington Matthews among the Navajoes, and of J. Mooney among

¹ *Phædo*, 38 (see Heindorf's note).

the Cherokees, are worth a score of volumes on the generalities of mythology. It is to the special student of written records, and above all to the investigator in the field, that the main honors are due, and it is by such alone that any real advance is made. The ink of general treatises is not dry before these are made antiquated by new discoveries. Under these circumstances, the least that can be expected is that new hypotheses may be presented in scientific form and for specialists in the first instance, — that it be not assumed that the first comer is qualified to sit on the jury in cases involving obscure problems of psychology.

It is further to be considered, as already intimated, that general conclusions are barren in proportion to their range, and that most of the wide questions which can be asked respecting the origin and character of folk-lore are in their nature incapable of a reply which shall be contained in a sentence. It is the pleasure of our time to explore sources, and with good reason, since creatures and ideas are comprehended only through their history; nevertheless, it will soon be discovered that there is a limit in this direction, and that nearly every valuable mental acquisition is to be found in the modest range of special and limited observation, such as escapes the necessity of groping in the chaos of ultimate origins.

These remarks may find an illustration in their application to one of the great problems with which folk-lorists (to use a word now accepted even beyond the limits of the English tongue) are called upon to deal; namely, the extraordinary correspondences observable between the traditions and superstitions of widely separated races.

To explain these correspondences, three solutions are offered; namely, the theories of inheritance, diffusion, and independent origination.

Until within a very few years, it has been the first of these views which has found popular acceptance. It has been supposed that the oral traditions of every people, in a simple social state, form a treasure bequeathed with little change from one generation to another, and in the main unaffected by contact with races of other descent. According to this opinion, in order to determine the ideas of the ancestral stock (every separate race being assumed to have a certain hereditary mode of considering the universe), it would only be necessary to compare the ideas of the various offshoots of the same root; thus would appear the common original element, and thus would be detected the modifications introduced through successive subsequent periods. Such is the method pursued by philologists with respect to language; by such researches they undertake, for example, to reconstruct the primitive speech out of which branched the Indo-European tongues. The same process, thought students

of myth who were versed in philology, could be used in folk-lore. Applied to peoples of the stock named, this doctrine assumes the "Aryan origin," to use a familiar phrase, of whatever is common to the nations concerned. By such methods, V. Rydberg has lately undertaken to reconstruct Teutonic mythology; similar principles, applied to Semites, have been employed in writing the history of the people of Israel.

This theory, however, has received a rude shock by the recent demonstration that differences of race and language are not necessarily an indication of differences in tradition. The Basques of Spain, for example, do not seem to have retained any characteristic tales or songs which may be supposed derived from their ancient stock, but rather to have assimilated the lore of modern Europe. The Bretons, primitive as is their language and their culture, seem singularly modern in the type of their traditions, which appear for the most part transferred from their French neighbors. The modern Irish, the Scotch Highlanders, have borrowed much from the hated English; and if they have retained some of the hero tales of their forefathers of six centuries since, those forefathers, in their turn, were influenced by contact with Latin Europe and Christian or Pagan Scandinavia, so that it is quite impossible to construct anything like an original Celtic tradition. The labors of S. Grundtvig and of F. J. Child have made it clear that the ballads of the Middle Ages were a common property; from Italy to Norway, from Spain to Greece, the vine of popular tradition trailed over Europe, striking root now here, now there, alike in Denmark, Scotland, France, and Germany passing itself off as a child of the soil. There is, therefore, between language and lore no such relation as warrants us in reasoning from one to the other. It does not follow that because certain beliefs and stories are found in ancient poems of Scandinavia, Persia, and India, that their concordance is of necessity to be ascribed to race influence; nor can it be taken for granted that traditions common, for example, to Hebrews and Babylonians, necessarily go back to a period before the separation of the former. Such are the relations of studies apparently the most trifling to studies apparently the most important, that investigation into the history of popular songs, nursery tales, and childish games has modified the way in which men are required to reason on the most serious topics of the development of civilization and the history of religion.

It must not be supposed, however, — and this is the point I wish to make, — that in discarding the theory of inheritance as a doctrine, it is therefore to be rejected as a possibility. If modern research demonstrates the changeableness of tradition in some cases, it no less exhibits its permanence in other cases. Some of the ballads

which here and there still continue to be sung in Europe are known to have had an existence in rhythmical form for eight hundred years. Even in the New World, more than one childish game-formula is still in use which was familiar to Attic youth¹ in the days of Xenophon.

It is not proven that the oral tradition of North American Indians or Eskimo is less tough than that of civilized Europeans. If there are songs and tales a thousand years old in the one, so, it would seem, there may be in the other. In native American lore, indeed, there are tokens of very great longevity. Archaic forms, unintelligible expressions, abound; the sacred languages in which the tales are contained are apparently a guarantee of antiquity, in the mass if not in particular instances. What are the two or three hundred years which have elapsed since the arrival of Europeans, compared to the age thus indicated?

It is in the department of folk-tales that this resemblance most clearly appears. The labors of men like Benfey, R. Köhler, E. Cosquin, and T. F. Crane have made it clear that any tale which has achieved popularity in one part of this vast territory is likely to be met with in other parts. Yet this resemblance may be ascribed to literary communication, which has unquestionably had a great influence; as in fact Benfey did attribute the diffusion of tales principally to literary channels.

But, as collection proceeds, it becomes evident that a like resemblance exists in other kinds of lore, which writing has never been instrumental in communicating. This could be extensively illustrated, but I confine myself to one striking example. Every American is familiar with counting-out rhymes of the "eny, meny, mony, my" type. He will remember the early associations which cling about these formulas; and by inquiry he will discover that the form used in every locality and by every group of children differs or differed. Now rhymes of this type are common to all European peoples; not only so, but probably to most Asiatic races. H. Carington Bolton, who has made a collection, includes two examples from Japan. China and India will furnish similar formulas. In all this wide territory these rhymes appear to have a common character of meaninglessness. It may be that they are derived from formulas of sorcery, as is maintained by Bolton and C. G. Leland, but at least that character is not now apparent in the rhymes regarded as a class. Now, there can be no question that these were communicated from language to language, while on the other hand it is equally obvious that the tradition, among each people using the method, has a considerable antiquity. Here, then, is an example of diffusion

¹ *Games and Songs of American Children*, p. 147.

with which writing has had nothing to do. Thus the practice of children, observed only within a year or two, illumines a point which the most elaborate researches of learned men had not before been able to determine.

The same process of borrowing is exhibited in our negro lore. The tales of Uncle Remus, so called, which Joel Chandler Harris first made known, have been shown to be, in part at least, of African origin,¹ and some of them are found also in Brazil. But many of these are probably not natives of Africa. Reasons could be given for supposing that some of them, originating in Asia, may have traversed the Dark Continent, and, becoming the property of Negro tribes, have been brought by slaves to North and South America, and there very likely encountered their own kindred in other forms of the same tale which has made the tour of the world in an opposite direction.

I have shown, in a book on games, how the popular game which we call "Jack-stones" (the old English name, like the ancient Greek, was "Five-stones"), having been the delight of youth in Europe for two millenniums, has, within these few years, on this side of the Atlantic, encountered an Asiatic variety of the same amusement, imported across the Pacific by way of Japan.²

Now, when leaving a field in which it is certain that from a very remote time there has been a continual intercommunication of the traditions of different peoples, we turn our attention to the American continent, we find ourselves in a region of obscurity and uncertainty.

In a paper just printed, Dr. F. Boas has discussed the origin of the culture of the Indians of Northwest America; he shows the great diversity of peoples inhabiting the Northwest coast, and the variety of their dialects. Comparing Eskimo life with that of the Northwest Americans, he concludes that each has influenced the other; but remarks that our knowledge of Alaska legends is too deficient to discuss the similarity of Indian and Eskimo folk-lore. He concludes his review with the observation that "investigations are everywhere hampered by a lack of accurate knowledge, sometimes even by that of any knowledge."³

If such be the inability of a specialist to draw conclusions respecting his limited subject, because of simple absence of information, much more is it hazardous to venture conclusions in regard to the general problem of possible remote connection with the Old World.

¹ See *Journal of American Folk-Lore*, No. iv. p. 79.

² *Otodama: Games and Songs of American Children*, 1883, p. 192.

³ "The Indians of British Columbia," by Franz Boas, *Trans. Roy. Soc. Canada*, section ii. 1888, pp. 47-57.

Among Indian tales which are at present collected, a certain number bear evidences of recent influence by contact with the whites. The sifting of the earlier original matter from later additions is a task which, in the opinion of experts, could perhaps be still performed if adequate collections were at hand, but which has not been accomplished.

When, on considering the mass of material obviously in the main of native origin, it is asked whether the rites, dances, and beliefs possessing apparent antiquity do not indicate some connection with the Old World, the reply must be that this is a question the answer to which at present will depend upon archæological and biological considerations, rather than on a comparative examination of traditions, a task for which hitherto the material has not existed either in one continent or the other. It may further be added, that in view of the inroads of civilization on primitive culture, and the indifference shown to the collection of myth, it seems not very likely that the means for such inquiries ever will be adequate.

It is some consolation, however, that the bearing of American myth on the lore of the Old World does not by any means depend on any opinion which may be formed regarding the manner in which similarities have arisen.

I will content myself with citing a single instance illustrating the correspondence between folk-lore of the Old World and of the New, and the manner in which the latter may cast light upon the former.

The boys of ancient Greece were fond of a game known as the Game of the Shell (*Ostrakinda*). This game appears, from the descriptions which have come down to us, to have been played as follows: A line was drawn on the ground, and the children divided themselves into two bodies, one standing on each side of the division, at a short distance away. A boy who took no active part, standing on the central line, tossed up a shell, of which the inside had been blackened, exclaiming as he did so, "Night or Day?" If the dark side fell uppermost, that party which represented the forces of day, and which stood on the east, took flight, and were pursued by the army of night, encamped on the west, and *vice versa*. If one of the fugitives was caught, he was called the "ass," obliged to carry back to camp on his shoulders his captor, and, it may be presumed, required to toss the shell in the next turn. This game was so popular that in the fourth century before Christ it had already given birth to a proverb, the phrase "turn of a shell" being employed to denote any sudden vicissitude of fortune.¹

¹ This description results from a comparison of the following passages: Pol-lux, *Onomasticon*, ix. 111; Eustathius on the *Iliad*, 1161; Scholiast to Plato, *Phædr.* p. 59 (Heindorf, *Phædr.* 252). With regard to the Greek proverb (also

This method of deciding who should begin a game may probably have been employed in other sports than the particular one described by Pollux. It is evident that the practice of tossing up a marked or colored chip or shell antedates the habit of casting a coin, which has been in use from Roman days to our own ; so that our custom of tossing a cent has descended, by a continuous unwritten tradition, from that of employing a stone or piece of wood. In confirmation of this I am informed by Mr. Stewart Culin that in India cowries are extensively used for this purpose, but in China are invariably replaced by coins.

Now let us see in what manner this use corresponds to the custom of our savages. The observations which enable me to give a partial answer to this question have been printed within the last year ; as far as I know, no other information is accessible.

Among the Wabanaki of the northeast of Maine a similar means of deciding who shall begin a game of ball is in use.¹ The player who throws up the chip spits on it ; the sides are distinguished as wet or dry ; and according to the result, one side or the other begins. Probably, if the traditional account of the origin of the game could be obtained, there would be found to be a mythical explanation involving some reference to divine inventors of the sport ; heavenly beings are supposed to engage in it, and the Aurora Borealis is considered to be a divine ball-player.

The terms Day and Night, which do not appear in the Wabanaki custom, do enter, singularly enough, into the manner in which a game is begun among the Navajoes of New Mexico, while at the same time these terms, and the method of decision, are connected with a creation myth of a nature characteristically American.²

The favorite Navajo gambling game is *Kesitce* (the game in which moccasins are laid side by side), which is to some extent of sacred character, and can be played only during the dark hours, it being believed that any player on whom the sun shines while engaged in the

employed by Lucian), the most interesting passage is Plato, *Republic*, vii. 521. The philosopher is considering how properly educated political leaders are to be raised up ; and, in order to set forth his doctrine that there is a definite method by which the object may be effected, remarks that such education "would not be the spinning of a shell, but the guidance of spirit forth from dusk [literally, a sort of nocturnal day], on that true upward path of being which we will term philosophy." In other words, there is from darkness to light a certain path, not the accidental and sudden change by which such transition is effected in the game. The English translators do not make the passage intelligible.

¹ Mrs. W. W. Brown, *Transactions of the Royal Society of Canada*, section II. 1888, p. 46.

² Washington Matthews, "Navajo Gambling Songs," *The American Anthropologist*, January, 1889.

game will be stricken blind. The game consists in guessing the position of a ball concealed in one of several moccasins. To decide who shall begin, a small, weather-stained fragment of wood is rubbed with charcoal and tossed up. If the black side falls uppermost, the party of night are to begin ; if on the other side, the party of day. The origin of the sport is explained by a myth. In the ancient days there were certain of the animals who could hunt better and were happier in the night, and others who preferred the day ; accordingly, they determined to settle their differences by a game of *Kesitce*. If the party of night won, darkness was always to endure ; if the side of day, it should be forever light. Unhappily, the game could never be settled, so that night and day alternated as before.

It would be interesting to know whether this mode of decision is employed also in other Navajo games, and whether there may not be one which corresponds to the Wabanaki.

It is, of course, not to be assumed that the resemblance between the native American and Greek customs implies any historical connection ; at the same time the correspondence is sufficiently singular, and it would be in the highest degree interesting to know to what extent a similar custom could be traced through Asia.

However, it is quite in accordance with my present purpose to observe that it is the fact of the Navajo game itself, and not a theory about the source of the game, which is the interesting point. For though the latter may be entirely an independent invention, it casts a broad and interesting light on the state of mind which the opposition of night and day, found in the Attic custom, implies. The mythological trait which introduces the vicissitudes of light and darkness into a game involves a derivation from a time in which religious considerations had a far closer connection with habits of sport than in the days of Plato ; and of that unknown pre-Hellenic antiquity, which the mists of time do not allow us to penetrate, we find a reflection in the mental state of the American Indian of to-day, who is living in a state of culture from which the ancestors of the Athenians of Plato's time had emerged for thousands of years. Similarly, Egypt and Babylon were six thousand years already in a state of high civilization : what we thence obtain is a literature ; their rites and religious conceptions are already more or less affected by conscious philosophy. Again, the influence of ancient centres of civilization extended so far that it has penetrated the Old World, and scarcely in the most remote and secluded tribe, as it seems, can we find a state of mind unmodified by the contact of early culture.

Here, however, in America, we have races until within a recent period unaffected by such influence ; here we can study prehistoric

man in the conceptions and usages of tribes to the full, for what I can see, as interesting as our much-lauded Aryan ancestors.

What use have we made of this marvellous opportunity? The white man has been living now for three hundred years side by side with these tribes, whose ideas, until within a very few years, have remained a sealed volume. Aboriginal ritual, and the faith contained in that ritual, we either do not possess at all, or possess only in fragmentary form. The material is perishing faster than it is recorded; the knell of this marvelous race is sounded; the wonderful spectacle of their existence is about to be removed from our eyes; we are to be left in a civilized world. With the disappearance of the American Indian will pass away the last opportunity for information; while we shall hand over to succeeding generations problems which cannot be solved, and doubts which will continue to vex the souls of investigators.

W. W. Newell.

WABANAKI GAME OF BALL. — In reply to inquiry, Mrs. Brown makes some additional explanations in regard to the Wabanaki game of ball, above alluded to. Two goals are made, consisting of holes dug in the ground, at a distance depending on the number of players, perhaps, if the latter are very numerous, as much as one hundred yards apart. A circle is then formed by those intending to partake in the sport, in such manner that the circumference of the circle passes through the goals. A person, standing in the centre, tosses up a chip, which he has marked with spittle. Each successive member of the circle says: "I'll take the wet," or "I'll take the dry." By this throw is determined to which faction each player should belong; as fast as the choice is effected the circle is broken up, and the players, now divided into parties, arrange themselves in two opposite lines, in front of their respective goals. After this arrangement is complete, a person who belongs to neither party, standing in the centre between the two lines, tosses up the chip, the descent of which determines which side shall begin the game. Victory consists in driving the ball into the goal of the adversaries; the bat used is a sort of racket, crooked at one end, and interwoven with strips of hide after the manner of snowshoes. The game is now little played.